Six Characters in Search Of a Geste

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Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale,” like all the other stories in *The Canterbury Tales,* is a story within a story. The tale, as told by the Miller, is a farcical, burlesque-type story, but the characterization of the Miller himself is real and lifelike. The poet Ezra Pound, who greatly admired Chaucer, writes that:

Chaucer’s *observed* characters are perhaps more real to us than Shakespeare’s dramatized figures, or come at one more suddenly from the page as living whereas the actor intervenes, or needs to intervene, to “re-create” the Elizabethan dramatic personage.¹

In what sense would Chaucer’s characters be more real to us than Shakespeare’s? Is Alisoun, the wife in the Miller’s story, more real than Desdemona, a tragic victim of her husband’s jealousy? Or is the carpenter more real than Othello? However, one character in “The Miller’s Tale” is very realistic—the Miller himself, who is perhaps even more vivid and true to life than his counterpart in Shakespeare’s plays, Falstaff. The truth of Pound’s statement lies more in the characterizations of the pilgrims, the story-tellers themselves, than in the characters in their stories, and also, in the way their stories reflect their personalities. This farcical and bawdy tale told by the Miller serves a dual purpose: it provides comic relief for the audience and reflects the Miller’s personality.

In the prologue to “The Miller’s Tale,” Chaucer describes the Miller as being loud and drunken, a man who “nolde avalen neither hood ne hat,/Ne abyde no man For his curteisie,” (lines 14-15) This description of his character is confirmed and elaborated by many carefully placed details—details that delineate his personality for the
reader—in the tale he tells, which, in sharpest contrast to “The Knight’s Tale,” bears the same emotional significance and truth as the licentious satyr-play bore to the sublime values of the heroic trilogy that preceded it, in that it serves as the comic relief that returns us to our earthly, everyday lives. The Miller’s story, in itself totally implausible, is nonetheless psychologically true because it reveals the “earthy” character of the Miller himself. It is the kind of story only he would tell, and as he tells it, his personality becomes not less but more tangible and real to us. The story does not (or should not) offend us because we as readers know of people like the Miller who tell, although far less artfully, the same type of stories in real life. His story reflects him. We can laugh at the scholar’s pain and the carpenter’s fall because we know these events are real only in the Miller’s imagination. What we are enjoying is his pleasure in telling the story and how that story reflects his personality. He is the first character in search of a geste.

Before the Miller can begin, however, another character, the poet Chaucer, intervenes with an apology. This apology is strictly a device to make the Miller’s presence more real to us and insure that we remember it while listening to his story. Chaucer asks the audience not to hold him responsible for what follows: he is merely reporting the story as it was told:

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of evel entente, but that I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or worse,
Or elles falsen som of my matere.

(lines 63-67)

This direct aside to the reader is like a stage manager stepping out to make an appeal to the audience before the curtain arises, ostensibly to take the “curse” off the bawdy action to come. But the apology should not mislead us. Its real purpose is to rivet our attention, and it makes Chaucer himself the second character in search of a geste.

The third character in search of a geste is John the carpenter, who, like the Miller is an older man and a member of the working class. He
is a stock character in the best comic tradition, a jealous, older husband wedded to an eighteen-year-old woman with a "likerous yé." (line 136) It is inevitable that he should be cockolded. It only remains to be seen how this end will be achieved, and it is in the invention of this action that the tale becomes, to the Miller’s way of thinking, a memorable one, worth the telling and worth the hearing.

The fourth character in search of a geste is Alisoun, John’s wife. She is even more of a stock, two-dimensional character, seduced with scarcely a struggle, yet not without an impish streak of her own. She has the erotic, mischievous personality type that the Miller would be attracted to, and she fits his idea of the true nature of women. After her suitor, the scholar Nicholas, has persuaded the carpenter of an impending catastrophe and divulged to him his preposterous plan of action (to hang three tubs at the corners of the roof), Alisoun rushes forward:

Allas! go forth thy wey anon,
Help us to scape, or we ben lost echon;
I am thy trewe verray wedded wyf;
Go, dere spouse, and help to save our lyf.

(lines 499-502)

It is altogether consistent with the Miller’s portrait of Alisoun that it is her idea to present her nether parts out the window for the soul-sighing Absolon to kiss. Even the description of Alisoun, which at first seems too elaborate and refined for the course-mouthed Miller, perfectly represents his idea of a desirable young woman—"as any wesele hir body gent and smal" (graceful and slim). (line 126) Here we get one of those two-way mirrors only a great poet can create. To the Miller, Alisoun’s body is "graceful and slim" as a weasel’s, but to the poet, "as any weasel, her body is graceful and slim." The inversion of these words by the poet gives us insight into the Miller’s personality by placing first in the reader’s mind the thought of the weasel, in reality a destructive and vicious animal.

The fifth character in search of a geste is "hende" (meaning "agreeable") Nicholas, the con artist of the Miller’s tale, a student of astrology and pretended thief of “Goddes privetee.” (line 56) It is not
his “prying” into God’s secrets, as the Miller makes clear in the prologue, that sets Nicholas apart, but the use to which he puts his knowledge of the heavens in conning the carpenter. A man should not inquire into his good fortune, says the Miller:

An housbond shal nat been inquisitif  
Of Goddes privat, nor of his wyf.  
So he may finde Goddes foyson there,  
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere.  
(lines 55-58)

Although the carpenter makes it clear that he considers the scholar’s prying into God’s secrets an immorality, the scholar shrewdly realizes that this stand is the carpenter’s weakness. Just as the carpenter simply cannot accept his good fortune in having a young wife but pries into her “privetee,” and jealously “heeld hir narwe in cage,” (line 116), neither can he refuse when Nicholas lets him in on one of God’s “secrets”—the coming flood—and self-centeredly believes that he is the second Noah, the only one (along with his wife and Nicholas, of course) worthy of being saved.

Yet, despite his invention of the catastrophe and the way he contrives to separate the carpenter from his wife for one night, Nicholas has no more dimension than Alisoun. Choosing a time when her husband’s work has taken him some distance from Oxford, he dons what we are told is an artful and subtle manner.

As clerkes benful subtile and ful queynte;  
And prively he caughte hir by the queynte,  
And seyde, ‘Ywis, but if ich have my wille,  
For derne love of thee, lemm, I spille.”  
And heeld hir hard by the haunch-bones.  
(lines 167-171)

As a seducer, Nichalas is about as subtle as a Mack truck. Since it would not have been in keeping with the Miller’s character to relate a more elaborate story of courtship, refusal, and final acceptance, Alisoun gave in—quickly.
Everything goes according to plan. The carpenter hangs the three tubs from the roof, and gets into his. Nicholas and Alisoun climb out of theirs and go to bed for a night of love, until the unexpected intrusion of the dandied-up gay blade, Absolon. When he first appears, Alisoun, inspired by the presence of a lover, agrees to let him have a kiss at the window but presents her other end to him instead. On Absolon's return, Nicholas, wanting to surpass his paramour in impudence plays the same trick at the window. But instead of a passionate kiss, he gets a hot iron and in that way precipitates the carpenter's fall from the roof. It is a coarse climax to a coarse-minded invention, and it further conveys the Miller's personality to the reader.

The sixth character in search of a geste is Absolon, whose personality is exactly opposite to the Miller's—impeccably groomed where the Miller is careless in his dress; delicate in speech where the Miller is coarse and sodden; his hair arranged with care where the Miller never goes without hood or cap (not having the manners to remove his headgear). When he goes awooing, the clerk sweetens his breath, shoulders his guitar, and serenades in a high, mincing voice. But he reflects the Miller's personality in that he represents all that the Miller dislikes. After the night of love is over and lust for Alisoun is assuaged, the Miller, the puppeteer of this story, loses sympathy for Nicholas. Suddenly the humiliated Absolon becomes the Miller's agent and means of bringing the story to its roaring finish. Realizing the nature of the trick that Alisoun has played on him at the window, Absolon borrows a red hot iron from his friend's forge and returns to the window again, with results Nicholas will remember long after.

Aside from Absolon, the main characters all seem to be projections of the Miller's own emotions and perceptions. Alisoun is the simple kind of young woman the Miller likes to think the world abounds in; Nicholas is apparently what the Miller believes to be a younger version of himself; John the carpenter, although close in age and a member of the working class like the Miller himself, is in the role of a dupe which the Miller prefers to exchange for the role of the young lover. In this fashion, the story ends, with only a vague, implied moralizing against greed and jealousy:
Thus swyved was the carpenteres wyf,
For al his keping and his jalousye;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the toute.
(line 742-745)

As for the Miller, the only point of the story was the story itself, and the laugh it generated—at least for himself. But for the poet, Chaucer, a deeper purpose was served: another living portraiture, in the manner of the painter, built up by small psychological details. Set against the preceding “The Knight’s Tale,” its effect is one of overwhelming worldliness, the Miller in somewhat the same relation to the Knight as Falstaff is to Prince Hal in Shakespeare’s Henry IV and Henry V. Not every reader will like it, but no one who examines it closely can fail to be impressed by Chaucer’s power.

FOOTNOTES

2All quotes from “The Miller’s Tale” are taken from The Oxford Anthology of English Literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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